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Reagan Sees a 'Moral Obligation' By U.S. to Aid Nicaraguan Rebels

By GERALD M. BOYD

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WASHINGTON, March 10 — President Reagan, conceding that his proposed \$100 million aid package for the Nicaraguan rebels faces an uphill battle in Congress, said today that the United States had a "moral obligation" to provide the assistance.

Mr. Reagan, in a speech here to about 200 conservative supporters, added that he believed congressional support of his plan was growing.

Not Enough Votes to Pass

"This an uphill battle in which we are engaged, but we are making progress," Mr. Reagan said. "You can sense that the tide is turning in favor of the democratic resistance," referring to the insurgents fighting the Sandinista Government.

White House officials said privately that the proposal for \$70 million in military assistance and \$30 million in so-called humanitarian aid would be defeated in both houses if votes were taken today. They said Mr. Reagan was prepared to compromise with Congress, but was rejecting such a suggestion for now in the hope of getting the strongest aid package possible before the House votes next Wednesday.

The official said White House lobbyists were heartened by the favorable reception given the measure by several influential House members. He singled out Representatives Dante B. Fascell and Claude D. Pepper, Democrats of Florida, and Les Aspin, Democrat of Wisconsin.

Warning From Democrats

At the same time, the officials said they believed Mr. Reagan's selection of Philip C. Habib as a special envoy to Central America would help convince Congress that the President favored a negotiated settlement in Nicaragua. Mr. Habib spent the afternoon on Capitol Hill meeting with several congressional leaders.

Democrats critical of the aid package have warned that its approval could mean that more than \$100 million would be available for the contras, as

the rebels are known. They said that was because Mr. Reagan wanted to end Congressional restrictions on using additional money in covert Central Intelligence Agency and Pentagon accounts.

In an apparent softening and shift in tactics as the Administration's lobbying effort entered its second week, Mr. Reagan made no direct attack on his critics in his speech today.

He also met privately and individually with two Republican Senators, Daniel J. Evans of Washington and Nancy Landon Kassebaum of Kansas. Last week, in a speech on the Senate floor, Mrs. Kassebaum rebuked as "highly offensive" the Administration's effort to portray the aid proposal as what she said was a choice "between good freedom fighters and evil Marxists."

Mr. Reagan told the conservative audience today that aiding the rebels was not "some narrow partisan issue," but a "national security issue of paramount importance."

"On this issue, we must act not as Republicans, nor as Democrats, but as Americans," he said. "At a critical early stage, the United States gave hope and help to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua. We have a moral obligation now, after a couple of years' gap, to continue that support."

Quoting from Senator Henry M. Jackson, the Washington Democrat who died in 1983, Mr. Reagan said, "In matters of national security, the best politics is no politics."

Says Consensus Is Growing

Mr. Reagan said that in the last few years, a "slow reconstruction" of the anti-Communist coalition had emerged on Capitol Hill that reflected a return of the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy that once existed.

"I don't have to tell any of you about far left ideology and the power that it once wielded here," he said.

"An ideology that automatically identified anyone wearing fatigues, carrying a rifle and spouting Marxist slogans as a liberator of his nation, an ideology that permitted many liberals to practice selective indignation, to hold to a double standard for certain dictators, to judge these dictators, now matter how repressive or cruel, less harshly because they called themselves Socialists, Marxists or Communists. But as I say, I think all of this is fading now and realism is returning."

Mr. Reagan said the new mood he saw in Congress was reflected by its lifting last year of crubs on covert assistance to rebels in Angola. The Administration is considering providing about \$10 million to \$15 million to Angolan rebels fighting the Marxist Government there.

"What we're seeing is the end of the post-Vietnam syndrome, the return of realism about the Communist danger," he said. "And now we're ready for one

of the final acts."

In response to reporters' questions later, Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, said the President's remarks were not an implied criticism of the Carter Administration, which initially tried to work with the Sandinista Government after the overthrow of Gen. Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979.

Mr. Speakes said Mr. Reagan was referring to "that group of people who have historically opposed" the United States policy of standing up against Communism.

Mr. Reagan equated the situation of the Nicaraguan rebels with that faced by Hungarian rebels in the 1956 uprising against Soviet domination.

"The tragic plea could not be answered," he said. "That was when the tanks rolled down the streets, the Soviet tanks, in Hungary and crushed that revolution."

"Now we have the chance to answer a similar plea."

Mr. Reagan, who said last week the aid was needed so that American troops would never be sent to Nicaragua, said today that the contras did not want United States soldiers to be involved.

Denies Rights Violations

Mr. Reagan also denied that the contras had committed atrocities in Nicaragua. Several organizations, including Amnesty International and Americas Watch, have made such assertions.

Mr. Reagan said he had been told that the rebels had refused to destroy a power plant in Nicaragua, although such a tactic was being used by guerrillas opposed to the United States-backed Government in El Salvador.

"And those contras, those freedom fighters said no, that they would hurt the people of Nicaragua, and we don't want to hurt the people, our people, in Nicaragua," he said.